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HENRY ADAMS.

ROBERT SHAFER.

HENRY ADAMS "knew no tragedy so heartrending as introspection, and the more so, because—as Mephistopheles said of Marguerite—he was not the first." These words seem to me perhaps the key to the larger meaning of a remarkable book. *The Education of Henry Adams* was printed some years ago, for its author's friends, and it had attained a species of fame—through the mysterious references of those who had, by one means or another, got an opportunity to read it—before the book was, in the fall of 1918, given to the public through a new edition. One fancies that on the score of humour, of fully expressive style, of richness and sweep, the expectations of no new reader can have been disappointed. And these qualities of personality and developed style unite with the often extraordinary substance of the narrative to give it a permanent place in literature.

This has been recognised, and in periodical and daily press much space has been given over to the praise of Adams. Some reviewers, too, have attempted to picture forth his autobiography in little, offering as it were a prospectus to possible purchasers. Appreciation and portraiture, these are often the very proper methods of criticism, but neither of them fits with my present purpose. It occasionally happens that in the midst of an active life a man pauses for a moment to ask, with more or less interest, what its meaning may be. This autobiography forces the same question, though a quick answer is impossible. The book seems in its variousness, its inconsistencies, its fullness, as baffling as life, and one recalls Donne's satiric lines:

"Infinite worke, which doth so far extend,
That none can study it to any end.
'Tis no one thing, it is not fruit nor roote;
Nor poorely limited with head or foot."

Yet, as I think over the matter of Adams's book, the words quoted at the beginning seem to indicate one answer at least to the central problem raised by it. That the study of his own mind was the one kind of study which this man would rather have avoided and indeed did cast aside is a fact, the more full of meaning the more his final analysis of humanity is pondered; and it is fit that attention be called to both the analysis and its meaning.

Under Adams's searching gaze man becomes simply a force of nature. We boast that through our beneficent handmaiden, Science, we subdue nature to our will and make her serve human purposes; we believe that particularly of late years we have made tremendous strides in bending natural energies to our service for the betterment of life—or we did before the War, and there is as yet no sign that the War has taught many persons its lesson. Of this Adams will have nothing: "the fiction that society educates itself, or aims at a conscious purpose, was upset by the compass and gunpowder which dragged and drove Europe at will through frightful bogs of learning." In other words, the forces of nature capture man and bend him to their will. As himself one force of nature man merely assimilates other natural energies and sends them out again in new directions, but he has no more 'control' over the latter process than over the former. The reduction of the world, of society, to order is a notion that exists only as a dream, an illusive mirage, in the eternally hopeful mind of man. He pushes on to new achievements in the ordering of knowledge, of society, merely to find that his apparently successful efforts have brought him face to face with new disorders, with greater chaos, than any before imagined. Not only is man simply a deluded mechanism, but the forces of nature, of which he is one, cannot be reduced to any harmony or common measure. To use Adams's own easy contradiction, "chaos is the law of nature." This means, as far as can be made out, that natural phenomena cannot be reduced to any one set of formulae, that the phenomena are of diverse

kinds operating in diverse ways, and that the so-called laws of mechanics are convenient rules-of-thumb, of very limited application, but are not—as natural scientists blithely imagined until their own discoveries forced them to abandon the notion—true in any universal sense of the word. This means, in fine, that the world is a congeries of forces or energies—not moving in unison towards “one far-off divine event”—but floundering foolishly, hopelessly, purposelessly in eternal conflict and in consequent eternal chaos. We live, then, not in a universe but in a “multiverse” “where order is an accidental relation obnoxious to nature; artificial compulsion imposed on motion; against which every free energy of the universe revolts; and which, being merely occasional, resolves itself back into anarchy at last.” Adams notes that this description of the “multiverse” “explains much that had been most obscure, especially the persistently fiendish treatment of man by man; the perpetual effort of society to establish law, and the perpetual revolt of society against the law it has established; the perpetual building up of authority by force, and the perpetual appeal to force to overthrow it; the perpetual symbolism of a higher law, and the perpetual relapse to a lower one; the perpetual victory of the principles of freedom, and their perpetual conversion into principles of power”; but, he adds, “the staggering problem is our immediate outlook ahead into the despotism of artificial order which nature abhors.”

This is not a pretty picture. It is hard to grasp its meaning even in outline; but the more fully it is understood the less pretty does the picture become. It is not necessary to set forth here all its implications, or to observe how closely the description fits in with many events of the world to-day. Those who hunger for greater detail should read the book itself. Our present business is but to write down the bare conclusion that man is a mechanical force, comparable to a child's jumping-jack, hopping perilously he knows not whither through a weltering chaos which commonly overwhelms him; that his dream of progress

consists actually in the unearthing of new divergencies and conflicts of force; and that these conflicts of energy extend to man's own expenditure of force, so that each fresh triumph of social order really brings social anarchy so much the nearer.

The unlovely conclusion is far from what the most of us habitually believe about ourselves. To some it may seem preposterous—the merely fantastical speculation of an embittered and lonely old man. Preposterous perhaps the picture is if man is something more than merely a social being, but let no one deceive himself. Adams is voicing no eccentric or daringly original opinion; on the contrary, his description of our world is precisely that of every natural scientist of the present day who knows what he is about, and Adams is also at one with the natural scientists in assuming man to be a purely natural force. It is from this that his book derives a large part of its importance, and because of this it is likely to be more and more recognised as a significant piece of work.

“Know thou this,” said Edmund to the Captain in *King Lear*, “that men are as the time is,” and Adams, as he cheerfully admits, agreed with Edmund and the Captain. His life was one long attempt to conform himself to “the time.” This attempt led him to follow with open mind the process of scientific discovery and conclusion from Darwin's *Origin of Species* into the present century. Darwinism, to be distinguished from Darwin's own cautious generalisations, Adams found a frail bark. He had resolved that “the current of his time was to be his current, lead where it might,” and from beginning to end he was true to his resolve;—only he could not help trying to understand what the current was and where it led. Thus he became a Darwinian for a time, although he could see behind the vast and imposing edifice of Natural Uniformity nothing save pure inference or assumption. Ponder the evidence as he might, he could only observe “natural selection that did not select—evolution finished before it began—minute changes that refused to change anything during the whole geological

record—survival of the highest order in a fauna which had no origin—uniformity under conditions which had disturbed everything else in creation”; and “to an honest-meaning though ignorant student who needed to prove Natural Selection and not assume it, such sequence brought no peace. He wished to be shown that changes in form caused evolution in force; that chemical or mechanical energy had by natural selection and minute changes, under uniform conditions, converted itself into thought. The ganoid fish seemed to prove—to him—that it had selected neither new form nor new force, but that the curates were right in thinking that force could be increased in volume or raised in intensity only by help of outside force.”

This severely questioning attitude made Adams the more ready for the revolutionary developments of natural science in the decade from 1890 to 1900. He had had, indeed, the veil lifted from before his eyes in 1870, when the accident that caused the death of his sister revealed the world to him as merely a complex of anarchic and purposeless forces. But this illumination had lasted only for a moment, and then again the world had clothed itself “with the illusions of his senses.” In the decade just mentioned, however, when the amazing discovery of such supersensual forces as radium plunged man into Spencer’s forbidden Unknowable and tumbled to the ground all comparatively comfortable uniformitarian theories, Adams had no recourse but to fall back on his earlier moment of illumination. And Adams’s statement of the present position of natural science is one that would be agreed to by all scientists to-day who have any interest in meanings as well as facts.

Adams continues, it should be understood, his questioning attitude. In fact from beginning to end his narrative is the record of a consistent effort not simply to familiarise himself with the facts of the surrounding world, but to understand their implications, their meaning; and this of course is why he terms it the record of an education. This, too, gives the book a very great part of its interest and value. For Adams through his constantly questioning

attitude, through his effort to arrive at the actual bases of theories, at the real meaning of facts, has succeeded in presenting for all men a picture astonishingly candid, clear, unequivocal, of the trend of his time. Men can see now with his help—what many of them with the best will in the world before could not—precisely where the age is going. With his help all men may now grasp and understand alike the discoveries and the problems left us by the remarkable age just past. It has been no small matter for regret that both the assumptions and the conclusions of modern science have been for the most part stated in formulae or words which only the interested specialist can understand, and that the popularisers of scientific knowledge—Huxley and his followers—have been so largely wanting in disinterestedness, or intelligence, or candour, or all three. But *The Education of Henry Adams*, it may be hoped, has at length put the fundamental issues of the present day squarely before the generality of men. They are at length told in language singularly clear and vivid, that in the eye of science the world is a complex of anarchic and purposeless forces of diverse kinds acting in diverse ways, that man is simply one of these natural forces, and that as such he is a mechanism tossed hither and thither in conflict alike with himself and other natural energies in fashions beyond his control.

Adams's book not only performs this very great service, but it further exhibits distinctly the type of man who can subscribe to such a conclusion. The type divides itself into two classes. The commoner variety we all know. He is the type of man whose beliefs are easily fixed; who, without much insight or critical talent, needs only to believe concerning the deeper meaning of life what his own little world already believes, and what consequently to his rough judgment figures as "correct," in order to set free his nature for practical activities. We cannot say that the age's answer to life's riddle is to this kind of man unimportant or indifferent; but we do him no injustice, surely, in pointing out that he expends little time or thought upon the question,

and that the stimuli to which his energies most readily and effectively respond lie within the so-called practical sphere and are largely connected with life's material, day-to-day needs. Consequently this type of man tends to accept his surroundings from age to age as he finds them. His problems arise from the attempt to satisfy his appetites under conditions already given. He becomes anxious to change those conditions only when they force upon him an undue or intolerable repression of his acquisitive nature. Hence such a man's fundamental beliefs, though they may influence his character and happiness more than he realises, are accepted by him from others; and he tends to scoff at any dispute about their nature or basis—confidently assuring us that life is much the same whatever one's beliefs, since we are what we are in any case and life consists mainly in the performance of deeds for which there is other stimulus—winning a wife, procuring subsistence, making a "name," achieving power. This man, as I say, we all know, and we find him for casual purposes, as long as we do not interfere with his interests, a delightful companion. It is a part of his business to fit easily into the social order. And he it is who gives mass, weight, authority, compelling force, to any cause once it is well started. He it is who enables powerful leaders to extend themselves over the four corners of the earth and into its forgotten crevices, and to project themselves indefinitely into the abyss of time. His stabilising influence is incalculable, and it is the greater pity that it works so blindly and may lend itself to harm as easily as to good.

Henry Adams by his intelligent and vigorous scepticism proves that he had a deeper and more independent nature than this. It is a wise remark of Pascal's that the truth lies in scepticism—*le pyrrhonisme*, as he calls it; though of course one may put questions idly as well as purposefully. Well, Adams seems to question all things under the sun, and not in mockery, but in simple honest effort to understand, to penetrate beneath the shifting shows of things to some firm keystone of reality.

And yet despite his vigorous intellect, his fearless originality, and his searching questions Adams turns out to be fundamentally the same species of man as that just spoken about. He is so because he did not after all question everything under the sun. He stopped short of doubting the natural scientist's basic assumption of materialism. He had resolved, as we have seen, that the current of his time should be his current, and he was one with his age in that it apparently never occurred to him to make that last negation. The fact is decently blurred in the narrative, but it is a plain fact that Adams coveted power, position, in early life perhaps office; that he yearned to meddle with the destinies of men. And so although he did seek truth, he sought—as he himself says—only enough for his practical purpose. That purpose was to gain prevision of the movement of society—the one kind of knowledge most necessary to the workaday wielder of power. For this he was impelled to look beneath the changing appearances of the world, but not dangerously far beneath them. He complains, and rightly, that his scepticism did in fact take him further than he intended; but it did not carry him beyond materialism, or naturalism, tacitly the foundation for the view-point of the worldly or practical man. Because, then, of his purpose and of the limitation of his scepticism Adams was immersed in the world of affairs just as is the average man of the street. He had a more ambitious purpose and was after a bigger prize than generally urges on this latter person, but the direction of his vision was the same; that is, it was consistently outward into the world of practical activity. And this outwardness one takes to be the keynote of Adams's personality. "Of all studies the one he would rather have avoided was that of his own mind." The truth of the statement is written large throughout his book.

Introspection is a heartrending tragedy, says Adams, because all one does is "drown one's self in the reflexion of one's own thought." What this means becomes more clear when it is remembered that to Adams the mind is only a

storage-house for natural force, thought being the middle stage between a human being's reception of natural energy and his subsequent expulsion of it in a new direction. Thus there is no originaive power in thought, and consequently in a person, and only the illusion of directive power. Further, since what we see in the mind is only the reflexion of external force of various kinds, we are merely withdrawing ourselves from reality or truth by looking within. By looking outside ourselves, then, we approach reality, and so we must glue our eyes to this solid-seeming earth for any possible illumination, any glimpse of truth.

It is not surprising to find that for a man of such outwardness of vision religion simply did not exist. It is perhaps not Adams's fault that the desiccated religion of his youth seemed to him unreal, and that as early as possible he deserted the Unitarian fold. But later in life he came to see, from the outside, what a place religion had occupied historically in the life of humanity, and he imagined something of how much it must have meant to those for whom it was real. Then he attempted to see if it could not still mean something to him but, very naturally, it could not. It remained as unreal as in his youth. The only difference was that in the light of his increased knowledge he could not now dismiss it—he was forced to assign to it some meaning. This he interestingly did by putting it on a par with the conquering hero's love of power. Practically, he remade it in his own image. His reasoning is fairly simple: all men love power and seek it, though only a few achieve it; and thus men adore or worship the manifestation of power, the more so the more mysterious it is. Adams's treatment of mediaeval worship of the Virgin in *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*—also a remarkable book—here gets its explanation. Pointing out that “the monthly-magazine-made American female has not a feature that would have been recognized by Adam,” he goes on to remind us “that neither Diana of the Ephesians nor any of the Oriental goddesses was worshipped for her beauty. She was goddess because of her force; she was the animated

dynamo; she was reproduction—the greatest and most mysterious of all energies; all she needed was to be fecund.” And thus the Virgin was worshipped because she was the manifestation of mysterious energy. For us of to-day her place has been taken by the railway train, the radio station, and the like, spite of the artist’s complaint that the power embodied in these instruments cannot be shadowed forth in art. And Adams proves how true this is by mentioning that at the Paris Exposition in 1900 “he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross,” and that “before the end he began to pray to this new machine, instinct teaching the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force.” The dynamo, Adams admits, “is not so human as some symbols of ultimate energy” that have had vogue, but to him it seemed “the most expressive.”

In this manner did religion become materialised when examined from the outside, dissolving itself under Adams’s eye into something not recognisable by the religious. What then is to be expected from Adams’s reluctant study of his own mind, or soul? Is it astonishing to learn that he considered it an appropriate method of conducting this study to pore over the reports of abnormal psychologists? He so contrived to scrutinise his own soul by reading stories of what other persons had observed and inferred from the behaviour of still other people suffering from disease. He extenuates this evasion by explaining that what he wanted to learn through introspection was whether or not the soul or mind was a unit, was one. And he got from abnormal psychologists, of course, what he was seeking—he found that they were splitting personality up into complex groups. “To his mind the compound $\psi\upsilon\chi\acute{\eta}$ took at once the form of a bicycle-rider, mechanically balancing himself by inhibiting all his inferior personalities, and sure to fall into the sub-conscious chaos below, if one of his inferior personalities got on top. The only absolute truth was the sub-conscious chaos below, which every one could find when he sought it. . . . If his mind were really this sort of

magnet, mechanically dispersing its lines of force when it went to sleep, and mechanically orienting them when it woke up—which was normal, the dispersion or orientation? The mind, like the body, kept its unity unless it happened to lose balance, but the professor of physics, who slipped on a pavement and hurt himself, knew no more than an idiot what knocked him down, though he did know—what the idiot could hardly do—that his normal condition was idiocy, or want of balance, and that his sanity was unstable artifice. His normal thought was dispersion, sleep, dream, inconsequence; the simultaneous action of different thought-centres without control. His artificial balance was acquired habit. He was an acrobat, with a dwarf on his back, crossing a chasm on a slackrope, and commonly breaking his neck.”

This long quotation may show the expressiveness of the language with which Adams has clothed his thought, but it also shows clearly enough that he saw within himself simply what he had already seen in the world outside. Here once more is a picture which could only result from a singular blindness to first-hand knowledge and, it may be added, a singular keenness in dealing with the second-hand variety.

And again in the larger field of his observation of man Adams shows at once his keen intelligence and the outwardness of his vision. Adams, it need scarcely be said, coming of a family of statesmen, was brought up in an atmosphere mainly political, though somewhat literary as well. These surroundings helped early to develop in him what must have been already present as inborn talent, a faculty for closely observing and diagnosing political affairs. His notes on politics and society, continued throughout his narrative, are always full of interest; and some, though not all, of them show such accuracy of judgment as to appear, in the light of more recent events or later knowledge, well-nigh prophetic. And yet this talent, of course, led Adams into the habit of observing man in the mass, and betrayed him into thinking that what might be true of society, of the aggregate, was equally valid for the individual. We need

not follow out the workings of this absurd and yet dangerously tempting notion. The first thing perceived under such an external view is the death of morality, because of "one law that rules all others"—"masses of men invariably follow interests in deciding morals. Morality is a private and costly luxury." In precisely this manner a man of the street will admit some friend's superior morality in one direction or another, but will "explain" it by saying that his friend can afford it, financially, while he cannot. We have already seen where this outward vision finally led Adams. We have here seen the grand conclusion of all his search; that the world is a complex of anarchic and purposeless forces of diverse kinds acting in diverse ways, that man is simply one of these natural forces, and that as such he is a mechanism tossed hither and thither in conflict alike with himself and other natural energies in fashions beyond his control.

Adams says it surely was not his fault that the universe seemed real, and that "despite the long-continued effort of a lifetime" he perpetually concluded that not he but the appearances, not the poet but the banker, not his thought but the thing that moved it, spelled Reality. It is not my purpose to decide the question of fault. I wish only to ask, in contemplating this orthodox modern answer to the deepest questionings of man, whether we have to admit the implied necessity of pronouncing unreal *either* the universe *or* man?—or whether the positing of such a necessity is a pernicious absurdity, an evil snare set in place by the powers of darkness and death to entrap man in the very moment of his greatest pride?

It is plain, I hope, without further words that such a necessity is posited by natural science and answered in favour of the universe. It is plain that everything recognisable as distinctively human is swept away, swallowed up in the anarchy of mechanical energies into whose presence the modern scientist proudly ushers us. It is plain that we are conveyed into a world unreal, having no connexion with the earth we know or with ourselves—into a waste

place inhuman and desolate beyond words to cry our woe. This unescapable fact is no novelty; through ages it has been the disturbing visitant of every materialist. And if since Hobbes's day any of these gentlemen has not taken account of this intolerable dilemma it cannot be because he did not know of it. It should not be forgotten that some scientists, recoiling perhaps in horror from the abyss they have opened up, claim that they draw no conclusions, that they merely describe phenomena. The claim may be allowed for whatever it is worth; it can hardly be pretended that it rises far above quibbling, that these descriptions are not worded in terms of materialistic or mechanical assumptions. And in the meantime this suicidal doctrine is spreading over the earth, to the accompaniment of no one knows how much of misery and despair.

Let us by all means admit that the universe is real, let us insist upon it, but let us not therefore deny our own humanity, distorting ourselves into mere helpless mechanisms. The race has so far submitted itself to the dreary and hopeless gospel of mechanics, probably, because of the vast field of practical activity opened up by newly discovered natural energies and by the huge, unwieldy structure of present-day society. There has been so much, in our recent years of vertiginous change, crying to be done that the man of the world has swallowed the mechanical doctrine without digesting it, in his hurry to perform deeds of profit and renown. But to all men whose lives are thus at variance with themselves, who have consciously or tacitly denied not the world but themselves, reversing Christian ordinance, there must come sooner or later a day of weary, if not of agonised, reckoning—a dark day, at the best, of final realisation of the emptiness of the phantoms which they have so actively spent themselves in chasing.

The lives of such men are perilously at variance with themselves because, though all of Henry Adams's dead mechanic facts be true, man is something more than a merely social being; because there are two orders of fact

which every man must take into account if he would avoid disaster. These orders represent the external world, that alike of nature and society, and the inner world of our own human nature. The inner and the outer worlds are equally real, and men must pay heed to the laws and fact of both if they are to conduct their lives aright; but—and here lies the fundamental difficulty—these worlds are different, are even at many points opposed to each other. It is a dark saying, and yet men have always known this; every Christian must remember that he cannot serve both God and Mammon. The Author of this saying stretched the opposition to the breaking-point; but through the ages men have generally tried to soften the opposition, to harmonise, to reconcile inner knowledge with outward fact. The attempt has never succeeded. Perhaps it is not chimerical; but the fact is that such attempts have always ended in the denial of the reality of one world or the other.

Every one knows in which direction the pendulum has swung in our own 'practical' age. And every one knows with what insolent assurance men have proclaimed that at last we know the Truth. Yet Henry Adams, asking himself what he truly thought, discovered that "what he valued most was Motion, and that what attracted his mind was Change." He made, that is, the great discovery that the movement of the practical world feeds upon itself, growing into a mere love of excitement, a restless search for distraction from inner emptiness. And this man towards the close of his life-long sojourn in the outer world could only say that he was kept alive "by irritation at finding his life so thin and fruitless"; could only say with thinly concealed bitterness that "Noah's dove had not searched the earth for resting-places so carefully, or with so little success," as had he.

No, the external world of nature and society is real and studded with facts which every man in the ordering of his life must take into account, but it does not contain the whole truth. Every man is aware of a different world within himself which is his sole possession, by virtue of

which he is an individual—that is, not wholly merged in his surroundings. For men of insight this is an arresting and illuminating fact, but for all men it is a practical certainty, whether they consciously take it to mean much or little. In itself such awareness does not carry a man very far, and yet it may be termed the beginning of wisdom. For the man thus led to explore himself is on the track of knowledge certain, uncontrovertible, and of the essence of his being. No one has yet penetrated the mystery of personality, but all men are at times conscious of inward promptings of the heart—intuitions some call them—which speak with an authority final and absolute. This inward light is not an easy thing to distinguish. It is no more than a guide, something akin to that severe negative gesture known to Socrates. And it is in its essence incommunicable. It is a matter between man and his God, and may only be bodied forth in “likely stories” such as make up the greatest art and literature of the world; but, if the inward light once distinctly seen is followed, it leads man towards a world of changeless reality where fortune is not variable and happiness does not cloy and vitality does not flag. And only the man who is conscious that there is a portion of his being which thus differs from, and even opposes itself to, his mortal constitution and its surrounding world of nature and society—only that man has become in the full sense of the word human and has freed his whole nature for the tasks and problems of life.

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